WORLDS OF POWER™

A novel based on the best-selling NINTENDO® game by JALECO™

Bases Loaded® II

SECOND SEASON™

Book created by F. X. Nine

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Batter up!

Angel is the youngest guy on the team. He's a big friendly kid who grew up on a farm in Iowa.

Bill and Serge are two of the outfielders. They're always trying to tease Angel. Today they both poured glue into Angel's mitt. Now he can't get the glove off!

"Batter up!" the umpire shouts.

Angel's face is bright red. He's carrying his bat in his right hand, and he's hiding his left hand behind his back.

Now he's in the batter's box. There's no hiding his glove now. The umpire tries to pull it off, but that just makes the whole ballpark explode with laughter.

Angel's batting — with the glove on!

The pitcher is shaking his head. The infielders are cracking up. The runners are getting ready to run.

Here comes the pitch…

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Second Season

A novel based on the best-selling game by Jaleco™

Book created by F.X. Nine

Written by A.L. Singer

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To Nicholas and Joseph, the seeds of the Lerangis ball club

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THE JERSEY GIANTS

RF	Jack Prokop
2B	Waldo Weir
SS	Bob Siano
1B	Ben Jacobs
LF	Byron Angel
CF	Frank Kazmer
3B	Ronnie Farrar
C	José Dion

Bench

IF	Jorst Zigge
C	Erik Olsen
OF	Bob Quay
OF	Denny Rough
IF	Ed Popp
OF	Bill Norkus
C/IF	Lorenzo Favaro
OF	Serge Bierum
IF	Ted Sealy

Pitchers

Rob Seitz	Jeff Rubin
Mike Meyers	Ron Skaja
Jerry Berke	Rupert Main
Yukio Hori	Skip Conell

March 28

Let me come right out and say it. I play for the Jersey Giants, the worst baseball team in the league.

No, that's not fair. I take it back.

We just might be the worst team in baseball history.

My name is Jose Dion, and I'm the team's catcher. I'm also the team comedian, storyteller, and all around nice guy. I can say that, because I'm never going to let any of my teammates read this. If they did, they'd laugh. But it's all true!

Anyway, I'm writing this in the dugout, during spring training. I don't have much time, because our guys usually go down one-two-three in our half of the inning.

If my manager found out I was writing this, he'd probably trade me. Old Pappas doesn't have much of a sense of humor. He's off figuring out strategies on that laptop computer he always carries around.

If you ask me, he'd be better off just using his head. But just try telling him that!

Okay, so how bad can we be? I'll tell you. Zero and nine, that's how bad. Nine games, nine losses. And not close losses, either.

Yesterday, for instance, we lost 21–3. (Sounds like a football game, huh?) Anyway, we were playing the Philly Cheesesteaks — or the Steaks, as we call them. Now, all the baseball experts had predicted the Steaks would be in the basement this year. After this game, the experts changed their minds.

It all started to fall apart in the second inning. Ron Skaja, one of our pitchers, had been cruising along. He had struck out the side in the first. But the Steaks' leadoff man in the second, Hank James, hit a towering home run off a fat, chest-high fastball.

Now, Skaja is not Dwight Gooden. The man does not know the meaning of the word *smoke*. What I mean to say is, he throws junk. Breaking balls, sliders, split fingers, spitters, knucklers — you

name it.

But not fastballs. No way.

So I trotted out to the mound. "Your fly's open," I said, just to make him laugh. I mean, it wasn't open, and Skaja knew it wasn't. That's just the way I am, though. My job is to loosen everybody up. And some of them, like Skaj (just about everyone has a nickname), are bodaciously stiff.

Skaja looked nervous. I could tell by the way he was chewing his gum chomping on it, really. "I ran out," he said.

"Ran out of what?" I asked.

"Aw, you know… " Skaja replied.

"No, Skaj, what?" Actually, I did know. Skaja uses what they call "a foreign substance" on his baseball. No, that doesn't mean Mexican hot sauce or Canadian bacon. It means Vaseline. He keeps a tube of it hidden, and wipes some on the ball. That makes his pitches do all kinds of interesting things.

"Dion… " he said, annoyed. We both turned our backs to the home-plate umpire. Skaja reached into his glove and pulled out a flat, empty tube. "I have none left," he said. "Do you?"

"I don't carry that stuff around," I replied.

"What am I going to do?" Skaja asked.

"I guess you're just going to have to pitch like a normal person, buddy boy," I said.

"Like a — I can't do that," Skaja hissed.

"Try it," I said. "Just throw it where my glove is. You'll be fine."

Skaja was practically shaking when I left the mound. But his pitches weren't. They were nice and straight and slow.

Whack! A line drive to the outfield bounced over the wall for a grounds-rule double.

Whack! A single up the middle. Runners on first and third.

Suddenly Skaja got nervous. But the next hitter was the Steaks' shortstop, Percy Karash. Batting average so far: .108. Homers: none. An easy out.

Skaja walked him on four pitches.

Then he walked the number-eight batter. Guess what? No bases left. A run walked home and the score was 2–0, Steaks.

Out to the mound I went again. “You're losing your touch, killer," I said.

"Losing my touch? I just want to crawl in the dirt and hide!" Skaja was practically crying.

"That's it!" I said.

Skaja looked confused. "What? Crawl in the dirt”

"No!" I said. "Throw a pitch in the dirt. The next batter is the pitcher. He'll try to hit anything."

"All right, Dion," Skaja said. "You better he right."

I was — sort of. Skaja did throw it in the dirt, and the pitcher did swing for it.

Too bad he also hit it on the bounce — and sent it into the upper left-field deck. "A grand slam, Ladies and Gentlemen!" the announcer called out. The organ played wild, happy music.

It was 6–0, and we called for time. The whole infield came to the mound. Ben Jacobs lumbered over from first base. He's our cleanup hitter, but he always looks like he could use a little cleaning up himself. You'd think by the age of thirty-two, he'd learn to shave and comb his hair every day. Not Jacobs. All he cares about is hitting homers, which he's done 415 times in his eleven-year career.

Bob Siano and Waldo Weir got to the mound next. Siano's our shortstop and Weir's our second baseman. They were teammates in the famous Temple University baseball team that won the collegiate championship a few years back. Both are excellent fielders and amazing base stealers. Siano's not a bad hitter, either, but Weir is pretty weak in that department. Oh, one other thing: Together, they have more brainpower than the rest of the team put together. Siano writes articles for magazines under a fake name, and Weir wants to be a teacher.

Last came our elder statesman, Ronnie Farrar. He handles third base, and he's the team captain. When he talks, everyone listens — or else he bores you to death by talking until you agree. I

guess when you get to be as old as he is (thirty-five), you expect people to listen. He started on the Giants twelve years ago — when I was in sixth grade!

Anyway, did you ever wonder what guys like us say when we meet on the mound? Serious baseball talk? Complicated strategy? Pitching technique?

Guess again. Here was our conversation:

"Tuck your shirt in, Jacobs," Siano said. "You look ridiculous."

"Ahhhh, I oughta brain you," Jacobs replied.

"Hey, Farrar, how's your daughter's measles?" Weir asked.

"Clearing up, thanks," Farrar said. "How's your wife?"

Weir smiled. "Great. She's in the third row. Go ahead. Tip your hat to her."

"Did you make a reservation at the steak joint for after the game?" I asked.

"They said they wouldn't let us in unless Jacobs wore a clean shirt," Skaja piped up.

"Ahhhh, I oughta brain you," Jacobs replied.

"Okay, boys, that's enough," I said. "The sooner we finish, the sooner we eat."

That was it. Our conference was over. We went back to our positions, gave up sixteen more runs, then went to the steak joint.

Jacobs wore a soiled shirt, but they let him in anyhow.

And that, in a nutshell, was a typical day in the life of the worst team in baseball.

That night, I dreamed we would have a winning record. I dreamed we'd fight our way to the top of the league and win the pennant. I dreamed we'd take the championship series in seven games.

When I woke up, I was drenched in sweat. My wife says I was screaming as if I had had a horrible nightmare.

I guess when you've been losing long enough, winning seems kind of scary.

Still, it sure would be nice…

April 15

There we were, opening day. The spring sun was beating down, the air was crisp and cool. People came into the stadium happy and excited. We even got a standing ovation when our names were announced. It was a perfect, perfect baseball day.

Then we had to play the game, and suddenly it wasn't so perfect anymore.

Which was too bad, because we were on a roll. For us, "on a roll" meant winning one game. That's right, we had actually won a game in spring training. Can you believe it?

It was the last game of the preseason. Our record was 0 and 15. We were playing the Kansas Tornadoes. The Tornadoes had finished second in the Western Division last year, so we were underdogs, to say the least.

So what if they used their third baseman as a pitcher? So what if all our runs came on a pop fly that the left fielder lost in the sun? We still won, 3–2.

Well, you should have seen our locker room afterward. Someone shook up a case of lemon-lime soda and began spraying the bottles all over the locker room. Everyone was yelling and laughing and cheering. It was fun, but you know what? It was also pretty pathetic. The guys were acting like it was the most important win of the season. Like we'd never win again.

Then came today's game, and I began thinking maybe they were right.

The game started great. As I said, everyone stood and cheered as the announcer called our names. I was last out of the dugout. When the crowd saw me, they fell silent. Then they roared with laughter.

Why? Because I wore my costume upside down, and I walked on my hands. My pants were over my chest, my arms were through the pant legs. I had shoes on my hands and gloves on my feet. I attached a Frankenstein mask with a baseball cap to my belt. Can

you picture it? I looked like a monster walking onto the field with his hands in the air. I saw a famous pitcher do this trick once and I never forgot it.

My teammates were laughing so hard they were practically rolling on the ground. Even Frank Kazmer liked it. He's our center fielder, and he's kind of an old fud, if you know what I mean. Nice guy, but very quiet. He always goes straight home to his family right after each game. No joking around, no flashy clothes, no statements to the press. His playing is like that, too — solid, not spectacular.

Anyway, Kazmer was giggling like a kid. "Beautiful, Dion," I could hear him say. "Beautiful."

In fact, the only people who weren't laughing were Old Man Pappas and the Great Dome himself.

I guess I haven't told you about the Great Dome. His real name is Japes Throttlebottom, and he owns the Jersey Giants. Let me tell you, a person has to be rich to buy a baseball team. And the Great Dome is rich, all right. Long ago he founded a company called Throttlebottom Construction Supplies. They make everything from sandpaper to tools to steel beams. They also make a lot of money.

Let me tell you what Throttlebottom looks like. He's almost totally bald, but he grows his hair really long on one side and shoves it over the top. It looks something like guitar strings over a pink bowling ball. He also weighs about three hundred pounds. The huge gray business suit he always wears makes him looks a little like an elephant.

Throttlebottom was sitting in the first row behind the dugout, frowning. Pappas was sitting in the dugout, frowning. They both looked at each other and frowned some more. Then Pappas called me into the dugout and made me change. They wouldn't even start the national anthem until I got back on the field, dressed normally.

I figured a little humor would get the game off to a good start. Boy, was I wrong.

Our opponent was the Boston Beans. They were the Eastern Division champs last year, so we weren't expecting too much. Still, it would have been nice not to humiliate ourselves.

No such luck. Their leadoff batter, Gunther "Grizzly" Bahr, was

playing his first major-league game. He hit pretty well in the minors, mostly singles chopped through the hole. No power to speak of.

I felt kind of sorry for him, right then. His hands were shaking. Just behind third base, an old man and woman were holding up a sign that said MOMMY AND DADDY LOVE YOU, GUNTHER! Of course, everyone on the Beans was making fun of him.

"Hit one for Mommy!" one of his teammates yelled from the dugout.

"Smile for the camera, sweetheart!" another one called out. Oh, they were brutal.

Wouldn't you know it, Bahr smacked the first pitch over the center-field wall. Nobody could believe it. Bahr himself looked dazed. The stadium guards had to keep his parents from jumping onto the field to hug him.

Our ace starter, Jeff Rubin, just shook his head. Rubin's a great guy, a goofer like me. We got him from Boston three years ago in a trade. And what a trade! Since then, Rubin has won twenty games a year. The guy we gave up, Butch Franco, never lived up to his potential. He's now on the Boston bench.

"They're just getting back at you, Rube!" I called out to Rubin. "Settle down, now. Don't let it bug you."

Rubin smiled confidently. The next batter was the Beans' right fielder, Deke Smith.

He got a homer, too.

Then John Deaff hit one out of the park — and so did Rick Teylan, the cleanup batter.

Imagine. The entire team was hitting 1.000 against us, all homers, and we hadn't even gotten an out yet!

Before the number-five man came up, I strolled out to the mound. "I know, you're just trying to make them feel good before we blow them away, right?" I said.

"Sure, sure," Rubin said with a smile. That's when I noticed his eyes were bloodshot. Suddenly he sneezed into his glove.

“You all right, buddy?" I asked.

"Well, except for a hundred-and-two degree temperature and a bad cough and a little dizziness, I feel great," Rubin said.

"What?" I retorted. "Why the heck did Pappas let you start?"

Rubin shrugged. "He likes me, I guess."

I looked into the dugout. There was Pappas, tapping away on his laptop computer as usual. "Oh, well," I said with a sigh. "You'll settle in, pal."

I gave him a pat and went back behind the plate. Rubin went three and two on the number-five batter, Ben Storm. Storm fouled off three pretty good pitches, then swung and missed. *Whiff!*

"All right!" I shouted.

I jumped up and began to throw the ball around the horn. But before I could unload to third base, the umpire yelled, "Foul tip!"

You know how umpires sound. Sort of like hippopotamuses with sore throats. I turned around and imitated his voice. "Are you blind? He missed it!"

The umpire glared at me. "One more word and you're out of the game, wise guy!"

All around us, the crowd was booing. I crouched again and gave Rubin the sign for an inside curve.

The ball curved, but didn't quite make it inside. It sailed right over the plate.

Whack!

You guessed it. For the first time in Republic League history, a team had hit five homers in a row.

Five!

Well, I'll spare you the gory details of the rest of the game. We lost, 27–3. It shames me to even mention it. By the eighth inning or so, almost all the fans had gone home. Even the players' wives had left the stands.

Rubin pitched right to the end. Around the sixth inning or so, I yelled at Pappas, "Why don't you take him out?"

"Hey, who's the manager, you or me?" Pappas shot back. He tapped his computer. "This baby takes everything into account. I feed it all the game stats, and it keeps saying RUBIN. We'd

probably be losing worse if I took Rubin out!"

How can you argue with logic like that?

To make matters worse, we had to have a closed meeting in the clubhouse afterward. You know what that means — hanging your head low while the manager yells and screams for a half hour.

This time, though, it wasn't Pappas who ran the meeting. It was Throttlebottom. He strolled into the room and sat on the desk. It creaked when he sat on it. I was sort of hoping it would break. Not that I wish the old man harm, but it would definitely have cheered us up.

Unfortunately, the desk held up fine. Throttlebottom smiled at us and began speaking in a slow, boring voice. It reminded me of a teacher I once had who used to say “Now boys and girls" all the time — even though we were thirteen.

"Don't despair, noble Giants," Throttlebottom said in that stupid voice. I guess he was trying to be funny by saying "noble." He gave a dumb smile, then went on, "Mister Pappas asked me to speak to you fellows. Now, I could be angry. I could feel hopeless. But I don't. No, you all played much better than it seemed. In fact, I saw flashes of brilliance out there. Why, you'll be just fine, boys… "

He went on and on like that for a long, long time. I still wonder why he didn't yell at us. I mean, let's face it, we deserved it.

Maybe he really is a nice, patient guy. Then why is it I don't believe a word of what he says? Why do I think he's a phony?

I guess I'm just a sore loser, that's all.

May 1

I can't wait to tell you about today's game. It has taken me about three hours to settle down. Now I'm sitting on my bed, sipping a huge glass of iced tea, trying to keep from howling.

It's pouring outside right now, but it was dry at the start of the game. Dry and cloudy.

Just before the game we had found out that our team had made the record books once again. There it was, a big headline on the sports page: GIANTS FIRST TEAM TO LOSE EVERY GAME IN APRIL!

That's right. No wins, twenty-five losses. Pretty impressive, huh? The sports writers were going nuts. One of them wrote, "April errors bring May terrors." Another one said, "Someone should tell the Giants that April Fools' lasts only a day, not a month!"

Nice guys.

Well, the team mood was about as gloomy as the weather tonight. I bought a little rubber hog nose from a street vendor this morning, then wore it to the stadium. I thought it might cheer people up.

The first person I saw was Jack Prokop, our right fielder. Now, Prokop's a good guy. He and Siano and Weir are always goofing off in the clubhouse. (All three were teammates in that famous Temple University' championship team, and they're like brothers.) But tonight Prokop was all alone, sitting gloomily by his locker. When he saw me, his face got red. He jumped up and pulled the hog nose off my face.

"Can't you take anything seriously?" he yelled. "We're in the middle of a losing streak! Can't you read what the papers are saying about us?"

"Hey, hey, take it easy, pal," I said. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to lighten things up."

"Lamps lighten things up!" Prokop snapped. "Ball players play ball!"

"Right, right," I replied, backing away.

Some people just can't take a joke. Unfortunately. Prokop wasn't the only one. The whole team was grim.

The grimness got worse when we took the field at game time. Usually you can count on the cheering crowd to make you feel better. Not tonight, though. The stands were practically empty. There were more hot-dog vendors than fans.

Part of the reason was our opposing team, the Texas Wildcatters. Their record was almost as bad as ours. Who wants to see two losers slugging it out in the rain?

As usual we got off to a mediocre start. Yukio Hori was pitching. He gave up three runs in the first and one in the second. But Hori has excellent control and a wicked curve, and he began settling down. We got a run in the third, making the score 4–1.

The rain started to fall in the bottom of the fourth. When I came to bat, the water was splashing off the brim of my cap. There were runners on first and second with no one out.

"Bunt," came a gravelly voice.

I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I looked around. Pappas's face was buried in his laptop, and our third-base coach was giving me the "hit" sign.

I took my batting stance again.

"Bunt!" This time the voice was louder.

Maybe I was getting the signs wrong. I started choking up on the bat.

"Steeeee-rike one!" the umpire bellowed as the pitch whizzed by.

Now the third-base coach was furiously touching his nose, his elbow, his knee. Nose-elbow-knee, nose-elbow-knee. I knew that was the "hit" sign.

"Bunt!" the voice said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the Wildcatter catcher's mask moving. He was telling me to bunt — and throwing his voice!

Leave it to a catcher to know how to do something like that.

We're a weird breed. You have to be a little crazy to do what we do for a living — squatting directly in the path of ninety mile-an-hour hard balls all day.

"Bunt!" he said again.

This time I was wise. I shortened up on the bat and stepped around. The infield began rushing in. The pitcher uncorked a mean slider.

Then, at the last second, I went back into a normal batting stance. I smacked the ball so hard it almost fell apart.

Well, maybe I'm exaggerating. But I did hit it over the head of the third baseman, who was too far in. The ball rolled into the the outfield. I made it to second base, and both runners scored.

There was a weak cheer from the hot-dog vendors. The score was 4–3, Texas.

Well, I ended up stranded at second, but the real excitement happened in the bottom of the fifth.

Byron "Teen" Angel came to the plate with two out. Siam was on second, Prokop on third. Angel took his wide, wide stance, windmilling the bat around. At eighteen, Angel is the youngest guy on the team. He's a big, friendly kid who was brought up on a farm in Iowa. He learned to hit by whacking acorn squashes with a hoe. His main problem is that he always swings for the fences. He gets a lot of homers, but also a lot of strikeouts.

"Just try to make contact," Jacobs had told him before he went out on deck. Jacobs is like a father to Angel. He's constantly giving Angel pointers on hitting.

As always, Angel gave him a big, toothy grin. "Uh, yep!" he said. "Yep!"

Bill Norkus and Serge Bierum looked at each other and rolled their eyes. They're our two reserve outfielders and they're always trying to get Angel upset. Somehow Angel's constant happiness bugs them. I guess it's because he gets to play more often than they do.

So Angel stepped to the plate and drew a 2–2 count. By now, the ground was squishy. Rain was coming down so hard, even the hot-dog vendors had taken cover. Greg Lipkin, the Texas pitcher,

slowly took his signs. With first base open, he wasn't going to give Angel anything to hit. He checked the runners, then went into the stretch.

He threw a high, hard one, jamming Angel at the letters. Angel started to swing, then backed off. It was going to be too far inside.

The fastball screamed toward his bat.

Crack! Angel couldn't pull away fast enough. He clutched the bat at his side, but the ball hit it. It bounced weakly over the pitcher's mound, then died in the mud behind second.

The shortstop collided with the second baseman. Prokop scored. The Wildcatters' center fielder, Ned Worth, sprinted in and tried to pick up the ball. It squirted out of his hand, but he picked it up again. Siano was heading down the third-base line, and boy, can he run.

The catcher blocked the plate. Worth fired the ball home. It sliced through the rain like a white bullet. With a dull thud, it hit Siano squarely in the back.

As the ball bounced into a puddle on the third-base line, Siano slid around the catcher and touched home plate. He sent up a spray of water like a wave on a beach.

It was 5–4, Giants! We were screaming with happiness in the dugout.

Right away, the grounds crew came running out with the green plastic tarp. The umpires had called the game. No rain delay, no waiting. They just ended it.

And guess what? After four-and-a-half innings, it's an official game.

Which means we won!

Hey, even though it was a shortened game, it's our first win of the season, right? We may have been .000 in April, but we're now 1.000 in May, aren't we?

Well, aren't we?

Okay, I'll admit it. Just between you and me, I think the umpires were on our side.

May 23

I can barely write. My fingers are numb. My eyelids are drooping shut. If I say something that doesn't make sense, please forgive me.

What inning is this anyway?

Okay, I just looked at the scoreboard. It's the thirty-second. Thirty-two innings ago I was feeling full of energy. Now I wish there were beds in the dugout.

Who would mind? The entire crowd has gone home. The fans who stayed are all asleep.

The score is 6–6. It has been 6–6 since the ninth inning.

It's all my fault, and I'll tell you why.

Long, long ago, going into the bottom of the ninth inning, it was 6–5 in favor of the New York Apples. But we had to get another run.

At the time, it was very exciting. We had loaded the bases with no one out. Farrar hit into a double play, and a run scored. It tied the game and left a runner on third with two out.

You know how some guys are the heroes and some are the goats? Well, I might as well have said *"Baaaaah!"* when I came to bat. Their pitcher, Harry Nolan, served up a big fat one. A sure extra-bagger. I got so excited I swung too soon. I hit a dribbler to third, a routine out, and we had to go into extra innings.

And talk about extra! We've played almost four games' worth by now.

Guess who's on the mound for us? I'll give you a hint. We ran through the entire pitching staff. We even used up all our bench players. The rest of the guys can't pitch, because they have to play the field.

You guessed it. Pappas is pitching — if you could call it that. If I weren't so tired, I'd be busting my gut laughing. For one thing, Pappas has this huge pot belly. It wobbles when he shakes off

signs, it flops up and down when he pitches. He can barely kick off the mound.

If the New York players weren't so exhausted, they'd be hitting every pitch out of the park. But they can hardly lift their bats.

Pappas is the only one with a smile on his face. He thinks it's his spectacular pitching that's getting them all out.

"Hey, Pappas," I said to him just now, when we got to the dugout, "come on, throw up a home run ball next inning, so we can go home."

Pappas looked as if I had just confessed a murder or something. "How can you even suggest — "

"Just kidding," I said. "A joke."

Pappas got over it pretty quickly. He's back at his laptop now, scratching his head.

So now we're up. The Apples' pitcher is Matt Vance, who's usually their utility infielder. Good old Frank Kazmer is at bat, and he looks worried. He's probably wondering if his kids are asleep.

The first pitch was way outside, but Kazmer swung anyway. Strike one.

"Wake up, Kaz!" Pappas shouted.

"Easy for you to say," Kazmer replied.

Kazmer swung two more times and missed both. Now Ed Popp is up. He's a reserve infielder, but he's been playing since the nineteenth inning. He's a good hitter — at least when he's wide awake.

Here comes the pitch…

Ugh. Old Popp is living up to his name. He just hit a pop fly. It's floating lazily into left field. This'll be the second out…

Wait a minute.

I don't believe this. Seth Palmer, the Apples' left fielder, is lying on the ground! I hope he's all right.

All the Apples are yelling at him — on the field and in the dugout. The ball is coming down. This is so bizarre.

Now he's moving. His eyes are flickering.

Oooops. The ball hit him on the ankle! He sprang up. He's jumping up and down, holding his foot.

You know what? He was sleeping! The guy was in dreamland in the middle of left field! Now he's running after the ball — actually, I should say limping.

But Popp is flying. He's already around second.

Palmer's in the corner, trying to dig the ball out. Now he's got it. He's looking for his cutoff man. But the center fielder and the shortstop have both run into left field. The third baseman, Reggie Lukas, is waving like crazy. Popp's heading for third. Here comes the throw…

It's way off-line! The ball is bouncing toward the mound. Popp is coming home, standing up. We won the game!

Just a minute. I'll be right back.

Okay, I just went out and hugged Popp. He can't stop laughing. It's the first inside-the-park home run he's ever hit. The Apples are all slumping toward their dugout. Except Palmer, that is. He's just standing in the outfield, glassy-eyed.

I feel bad for the guy. I wouldn't be surprised if he just stayed there until game time tomorrow.

Actually, I should say "game time today." It's almost four A.M., and we're supposed to be back here for a matinee in about eight hours. I tell you, if this isn't the longest game in history, I'll be surprised.

But the important thing is that we won. Pardon me if I sound like I'm bragging, but hey, it hasn't happened that often.

What a relief! One thing's for sure, sports fans. Yours truly is going to sleep well tonight!

June 6

First, a word about team statistics.

Up till now, all of ours have been terrible. Here's a sample:

League's worst batting average: .201

Fewest home runs: 19

Most errors: 64

Fewest runs scored: 1.8 per game

Highest ERA: 7.13

Worst team record: 10–46

Surprised about that last stat? Yes, we actually have won ten games. That's something we're all very proud of — even though it's yet another awful stat.

Well, here's the good news. One of our team members rose to the level of mediocrity tonight. Yes, our very own Jeff Rubin has evened his record at four and four. He pitched us to a 9–7 victory over the Hawaii Macadamias.

It wasn't exactly a pitchers' duel. Rubin gave up thirteen hits, and we had sixteen. The winning hit was a three-run homer by Angel in the seventh. He must have been thinking of those acorn squashes, because he really got a hold of a fastball. I think the ball came down somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

You should have seen Rubin afterward. He was grinning like a little kid. We had a party for him in the locker room afterward.

A party for a pitcher who reaches .500? Only with the Jersey Giants!

Well, there we were, eating some Mexican food and having a good time. Food tastes especially good after a win, and my burrito was fantastic. Everyone was kidding Rubin, asking him if he thought he'd win MVP, stuff like that.

Jerry Berke, one of our relievers, held up a beef enchilada as if it were a microphone. "Tell me, Jeff," he said in a voice like a

sports announcer, "What exactly is the secret of your success?"

It seemed like a harmless, dumb question. But Rubin took it seriously. Looking back, I wish he had ignored it.

"Whoopee juice," he said with a straight face.

A few of the guys laughed. Rubin is good at deadpan humor.

"Whoopee juice," Berke repeated. "Uh, would you tell us about this marvelous drink?"

"Sure," Rubin said. "I read about it in a book called *Whole-Body Regimen for Health and Success*. It was used years ago by the ancient Greeks, or Romans, or maybe Egyptians. There's a whole way of life you have to follow — meditation, exercises, and plenty of Whoopee juice. It guarantees success."

"Louder and funnier!" I called out with a yawn.

"You can do better than that, Rubin," said Mike Meyers, a rookie reliever.

"No, I mean it," Rubin insisted. "You guys should try it. You just mix two parts spinach, three parts cubed turnip, a clove of minced garlic, three tablespoons of vinegar, four slices of raw eel, and a dash of chopped chicken liver. You blend it well, then sprinkle some bran buds on top."

"Yechhh!" Siano called out.

"Not funny, Rubin," said Farrar.

"It's not meant to be funny," Rubin said. "Look, I have some in the fridge."

We watched him walk over to the team refrigerator and take out a brown paper bag. He opened the bag and pulled out a huge glass, filled with a brownish-gray liquid. The smell was enough to knock you out.

"It's better if it warms up a little," Rubin explained, "but I forgot to take it out earlier. You see, ideally it's supposed to be at room temperature."

Without saying another word, he began slurping the stuff down in big, thirsty gulps.

We all just sat their with our jaws hanging open. Siano's face turned white. Kazmer's turned green. Suddenly I didn't want my

burrito anymore.

Rubin put the glass down with a satisfied *"Aaaah!"* There was a lumpy gray ring around his mouth. He had left about an inch of the Whoopee juice in the glass. "Sure does hit the spot. Anybody want to try some?"

"Sorry, Rubin," Angel said, bolting up from the bench.

"Gotta go home," Jacobs said, heading for the door.

"Mmmrrbbllglchh," Siano said, heading for the sink.

You have never seen a room clear out faster. I was at the hotel in five minutes flat, and I haven't been able to eat ever since.

Let me tell you, it was great to win tonight, and I was glad for Rubin's success. But somehow, knowing about Whoopee juice was enough to take the fun out of it.

My Little League manager used to tell me, "You gotta take the good with the bad." He was right.

Welcome to life in the big leagues.

June 21

I knew something was wrong with Weir right from the start of today's game. I could tell by the way he was standing at second base.

He was fidgeting like crazy. He'd dig his cleats into the dirt, then pull them out. He'd cover up the hole he made, then dig again. He'd pace back and forth, hitting his glove. He'd mumble to himself while the other team's batter was waiting for the pitch.

It bothered me to see him. We were playing the Los Angeles Raycatchers, who have some of the toughest pitching in the Western Division. We needed to concentrate.

Sure enough, Fred Kelly, their leadoff man, sent a screaming line drive right to Weir.

It scooted under his legs and into right field. "Weir!" Pappas shouted. "Look alive!"

Weir ran for the the ball, but Prokop got there first. He threw the ball to Siano, who was covering second. That held Kelly to a single.

"You okay, buddy?" Prokop asked, giving Weir a friendly pat with his glove.

"Yeah, fine," Weir said. He trotted back to position.

Siano had waited for him. "You okay, buddy?" he asked.

Weir just about exploded. "What is this 'you okay, buddy' stuff? Just because I made an error everybody's worried about me? Leave me alone!"

Siano silently went back to his spot. He was shocked. I don't think Weir had ever talked to him like that.

Then, in the next inning, Weir did something really strange in the on-deck circle. He put his bat on the ground and knelt over it. Then he closed his eyes, began rocking back and forth, and muttered to himself.

"What's he doing, praying?" Farrar said in the dugout.

Jacobs shook his head. "Weird," he remarked.

"Waldo Weird," Norkus said with a laugh.

Well, the nickname stuck. Needless to say, Weir hated it.

The thing was, Weir wasn't only acting different, he looked different. I hadn't noticed this until Skaja said to me in the dugout, "Doesn't he look skinny to you?"

"He's always been skinny," I said.

"Not like this," Skaja replied. "Look at his pants."

Skaja was right. Weir's pants were bunched around the waist and loose around the thighs. He kept hitching them up as he talked to Rubin by the watercooler.

Rubin was nodding. Then he started demonstrating some strange exercises that looked like kung fu or something.

When he closed his eyes and began chanting, I knew something was up.

I looked out to the field. It was the ninth inning. We were down 6–3, but we had a runner on second with none out. I wasn't due to bat for a while, so I figured I'd have time to do a little snooping.

I fiddled with my shin guard, then told Pappas I needed to get another one.

"Go ahead," he said. "But hurry back. We're mounting a threat."

I jogged into the locker room. It was empty, which was just what I wanted. I went to the refrigerator and pulled the door open.

There they were. Two brown bags. Two very smelly brown bags. I opened one and almost keeled over at the stench. There was Whoopee juice in there, all right.

Same with the other bag. And I knew it couldn't belong to Rubin. Even he couldn't stomach two glasses of that foul stuff.

My next stop was Weir's locker. I was in luck; he hadn't locked it.

I peered inside. It was crammed with the usual junk — spare uniform and cleats, street clothes, a couple of gloves, some

magazines, and some pictures taped to the walls.

But my eyes went right to a book stashed in the corner. A book called *Whole-Body Regimen for Health and Success.*

There was a piece of yellow note paper glued to it. In scrawled handwriting, it said FOR WALDO, USE THIS IN GOOD HEALTH. YOUR FRIEND, JEFF RUBIN.

That was it. That was the reason for Weir's personality change. Rubin had turned him on to the joys of Whoopee juice!

I ran back to the dugout. Weir was at the bat rack, rubbing some pine tar on the handle of his bat. He seemed deep in his own thoughts, but I didn't care. I was determined to talk to him.

"Hi, Waldo," I opened.

"Uh-huh," he grunted.

"You on deck next?" I said.

He wheeled around. "You can read the lineup card, can't you? Of course I'm up next! Now if you don't mind, I need to prepare!"

"I see," I said gently. "Well, I don't mean to disturb you, but would you mind going out for pizza with me after the game?"

"I don't touch pizza anymore," Weir shot back. "Do you know how many toxins are in processed cheese? Did you know that tomatoes are part of the Deadly Nightshade family? Now leave me alone!"

Suddenly I heard Farrar's voice booming behind me: "Hey, who do you think you are, Weir?"

"Yeah, Weird!" Rob Seitz added. Seitz is our ace reliever. He has a temper, and I could tell it was acting up. "Have some respect!"

Weir leapt across the dugout toward Seitz. "Don't call me that name!" he shouted.

"Hey!" Pappas yelled, coming between them.

"Easy, guys," Prokop said. He walked over to Weir and put his arm around him. "Look, pal," he said softly. "We've been best friends since we were in Little League, right? Now, I don't know what's gotten into you, but it has to stop."

"Gotten into — I don't know — who do you —" Weir

sputtered.

"Waldo," Prokop said, "if you don't snap out of it, you may lose all your friends." Weir started to protest, but Prokop cut him off. "While you're waiting on deck, just ask yourself this: Is it worth it?"

Weir stomped away to the on-deck circle. He began his little ritual with the bat, but his face was red with anger. He finally just picked up the bat and started hacking furiously.

When he got to the plate, the bases were loaded. Pappas frowned when he saw Weir taking monster cuts with the bat. "Who does he think he is? Babe Ruth'?"

I forgot to mention, Weir had never hit a home run. He's great with the line drives, and he always hits above .300, but power? No way.

The infield was at double-play depth. The pitch came in. A fork ball, knee-high.

Smacccckk! Weir took a golf swing. It was as if his arms had grown five inches. The ball shrieked into the outfield. The right fielder sprinted back to the warning track.

But the ball kept climbing… and climbing…

With a loud crash, it broke the glass of the clock high above the scoreboard.

The crowd was stunned. So were we — until these words flashed across the scoreboard video: GRAND SLAM! GRAND SLAM! GRAND SLAM! GRAND SLAM!

The game was over. We had won, 7–6. When Weir got to the dugout, all of us were standing and cheering.

But Weir had only a confused smile on his face. He stormed right past us and into the locker room.

We all followed. He walked in, threw down his hat, and marched right to the refrigerator. He yanked it open, took out his brown bag, and brought it over to the bathroom.

Then, without saying a word, he dumped the Whoopee juice down the toilet. "I hate this stuff!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Then, for the first time in about a week, Waldo Weir smiled. The cheering in the room was enough to break your eardrum —

but boy, did it feel good!

July 7

In a strange way, I think the Whoopee juice incident really brought us together. We all realized that no magical thing was going to save the season for us.

If we were going to win, we had to do it ourselves.

And guess what? I am proud to say that we have put together a bit of a winning streak.

That's right. As of yesterday, we've won four in a row. That is a club record!

I'm telling you this now, because I think the streak is about to end. It's the top of the ninth, and the D.C. Windbags are beating us 1–0. Their pitcher, Winthrop Duke, is working on a no-hitter.

If you mention the word no-hitter, it's supposed to be a jinx. So here goes nothing: No-hitter no-hitter no-hitter no-hitter no-hitter no-hitter!

Don't worry, I'm not being a bad sport. It's just that I think all baseball superstitions are dumb. No one really believes that nonsense.

Anyway, the guys are really loose today. Too loose, if you ask me.

Take Norkus and Bierum. As I said before, they're always trying to get on Angel's nerves. So far, it hasn't worked. I mean, you could say, "Angel, you're the ugliest man I ever saw." and he'd just smile and say, "Yeah? You should see the fella who lives above my uncle's store," or something like that.

Today, Norkus and Bierum decided they'd really get to him. I think it was Norkus's idea. Before we took the field in the top of this inning, they both poured glue in Angel's mitt.

Well, Angel gave his typical smile when he ran out to left field. He felt the gooey stuff, for sure, but I don't think he realized what it was. And he kept the mitt on throughout the whole inning.

Now we're back in the dugout. Of course, the glue had dried

by the time we got here. Angel tried to yank the glove off, but it wouldn't budge.

"What's wrong, Angel?" Bierum said with an innocent look.

"Oh, nothin'," Angel replied.

He pulled again. It was stuck — real stuck. Angel looked confused. He just folded his arms and stared straight ahead.

"Why don't you take your glove off?" Norkus teased. "Make yourself at home."

Angel tried to smile, but his face was tight. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look uncomfortable. You should see him right now. His arms are still folded, but his body is twitching like crazy. He's trying to get the glove off, but he doesn't want anyone to notice.

Well, you can be sure that Norkus and Bierum have told everyone what was happening. The whole dugout is in stitches about it. Poor Angel. I feel sorry for him.

I also feel a little angry. The guys are acting like the game isn't important. Just when we've started to win a little, just when we've started to feel good about ourselves, everyone's giving up.

Funny, isn't it? I'm the one who's usually a joker, but this time I don't think it's funny.

Uh-oh. You won't believe what the announcer just said.

"Batting fifth… Byron… Angel!"

Angel's in a panic now. He's trying to fling the glove away. His eyes are wide and scared looking.

"Come on, batter up!" the umpire just shouted.

Angel is giving Pappas a frightened look.

Pappas is shrugging and waving him onto the field. Now he's glaring at Norkus and Bierum like he wants to kill them.

With two walks and a double steal, their pitcher had managed to get into some trouble. "There are runners on second and third!" I said to Pappas. "Why don't you pinch-hit for him?"

"Hey, who's the manager here?" Pappas snapped.

I know why he's not pulling Angel out. He doesn't know how

to ask his laptop about something as weird as this. That stupid machine controls him.

I can barely watch this. It's too painful. Angel's face is bright, bright red. He's carrying his bat in his right hand and he's hiding his left hand behind his back.

Who does he think he's trying to kid? The whole first-base side of the stadium is talking and laughing about it. People must think it's a joke.

Now Angel's in the batters' box. There's no hiding the glove now. The umpire just yelled at him, and Angel had to explain. The umpire tried to pull the glove off, but that just made the whole ballpark explode with laughter.

Oh, this is terrible. Angel's batting — with the glove on! The pitcher's shaking his head with disgust. The D.C. infielders are cracking up. The runners are taking their leads.

Here comes the pitch…

I have to hand it to Angel. He got in a good swing, but it's a routine grounder to shortstop.

Wait a minute! Wait a minute!

There. I was gone for a minute, but now I'm back. You'll never guess what happened. The shortstop was laughing so hard, he bobbled the ball. Then he hurried his throw — and it skipped under the first baseman's legs!

Angel's smiling again now. He not only broke up the no-hitter, but caused us to win the game.

Can you believe the Jersey Giants have won five in a row? Are we just lucky, or could this be the start of something big?

August 18

Yes.

That's the answer to the question I asked at the end of my last entry.

Yes, July 7 was the start of something big. How big? Well, let's put it this way. I'm in the clubhouse now, waiting for a team meeting with Mr. Throttlebottom. Around me, everyone is whooping with happiness. We have just beaten the Miami Landsharks, 4–0, for our sixty-second win.

We have also lost sixty-two games.

You heard it right. My team, the Jersey Giants, the worst team in the league, is playing .500 ball!

Things are really pulling together. Our pitchers are sharp, our hitters are in a groove, you name it. I think the most important thing is that we're taking the rest of the league by surprise. No one expects us to win — ever. They treat us like we're a minor-league team. Then, whammo! By the end of the game, they don't know what hit them.

Here comes Throttlebottom. I'm going to put this away now. I'll write again later.

It's now three o'clock in the morning, and boy, do I have news for you.

Let me start with the team meeting. The Great Dome rumbled into the clubhouse, and Pappas closed the door. Now, remember that opening-day meeting I told you about? Back then, Throttlebottom seemed happy even though we were playing terribly.

Well, tonight Throttlebottom looked about as happy as a cold, rainy day.

I thought, maybe he just wasn't feeling well. But still, imagine if you owned the worst team in the league and they suddenly

reached .500. Wouldn't you be thrilled? I know I would.

But not Throttlebottom. He kind of looked around at us, then looked at his watch. "Ahem," he said. "I'd like to call this meeting to order."

We all quieted down. I thought he was going to tell us that he sold the team, or that he was going to fire us all. The news didn't look good.

"Uh, my deepest congratulations to you all," he said in a monotone. His lips turned up, but it didn't look much like a smile. "Now, I know you are all very excited. But I must emphasize that there are many more games to go. We must not get overconfident. Other teams will be taking us seriously now. They're going to be throwing their best pitchers at us, not their worst. Remember also that this is the time of year when players get the most injuries. Don't overdo it, boys. The most important thing is to have your strength — and continue to trust Mr. Pappas's computer. It got us where we are today." He took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. "Best of luck, fellas. I'm, uh, quite pleased for you."

With that, he turned and left.

The whole room was silent. It felt like all the joy had been squeezed out of us. Everyone got dressed and left silently.

But I got to thinking about the speech. And the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. *I'm quite pleased for you?* Was that the best he could do? I mean, we're playing the best we ever played, the fans are coming in droves. He should have been dancing with happiness!

It almost seemed like he didn't want us to win. And that was ridiculous.

Or was it?

That's when I started being suspicious. What if he didn't want us to win? And why wouldn't he?

Suddenly I thought about another thing he said. *Continue to trust Mr. Pappas's computer. It got us where we are today.* First of all, that wasn't true. Second of all, why would he bother to say that at a celebration?

Something was up. Throttlebottom was worried. I wasn't sure

why, but I had a feeling the computer was the key.

I decided to visit the ballpark later on, after dark. I drove up to the locked gate. The guard saw me and smiled. "A little batting practice under the stars, Dion?" he said.

I laughed. "Just forgot my wallet."

"Okay, buddy."

He let me in and I parked at a far end of the lot. Then I got out and walked into the tunnel that leads to the locker room. There were no lights at this hour, and I had to feel along the wall. I'm not the kind of guy who's afraid of the dark, but this was spooky. I thought it would never end.

Finally I came to the locker room door. I pushed it open.

The room is huge. It has showers on one end and lockers in the middle. On the wall opposite the showers is a frosted-glass window. Behind the window is the manager's room. Why is the glass frosted? I don't know, maybe so no one can see when Pappas throws temper tantrums.

I could see the outlines of the lockers. There was a light on somewhere.

As I walked further in, I saw that the light was coming from Pappas's room. I figured Pappas had left it on by mistake.

I was wrong. There were voices coming from the room. I dropped to the floor. Crawling on my hands and knees, I edged closer. The voices became clearer.

"Uh, yes, sir, I can create a simple assembly language program that will subvert the variables, diverting them to the antithetical solution… "

I didn't recognize that voice. I could barely tell it was speaking English.

Another voice said, "Don't give me that gobbledy-gook. Just do what I told you to do!"

There was no mistaking that one. Throttlebottom! I pressed my ear to the wall. "You bet, Mr. Bottlethrot — er, Throttlebottle — er… "

"Look, you want to be paid, right? If you don't get this job

right, you're not going to see any money 'cause I'll be in the poorhouse!"

"Yes, but Mr. Throbblebotter, I can't guarantee this. I'll program the computer, but what if Pappas decides not to follow the program's instructions?"

"I'll take care of Pappas!" Throttlebottom thundered. "He'll follow whatever the computer says. You just make sure to program the worst possible strategies. Remember, the Giants must have a losing season. I've got my life savings on this bet and I'd better win!"

August 20

No, I didn't say a word about it the next day (which was yesterday). I had spent the whole night pacing my room, trying to decide what to do. Here's what I was thinking:

What would happen if I blew the whistle?

Answer: I'd be fired from my job. Or the league would cancel our whole season, saying it was rigged. Or Throttlebottom would deny everything, and I wouldn't be able to prove it. Or Throttlebottom would be arrested. Then no one would own the team and we'd fold.

But what if I didn't blow the whistle?

Answer: I'd hate myself — but at least I'd have a job. The season would go on. Throttlebottom would go scot-free — but we'd still have an owner.

As the sun rose, I was feeling really depressed. Then I had a new thought.

Throttlebottom must have been trying to make the team lose all along, right? Well, his plan was failing. We caught fire, and nothing was stopping us from winning.

The computer guy was right. Sure he could program the computer, but that didn't mean it was going to work. A machine can't control human spirit.

I had my answer. I didn't have to mention anything. All I needed to do was keep the spirit going. I needed to rev the guys up, get Pappas's mind off the laptop. If I could do those things, Throttlebottom would lose his bet.

Then, after the season I could go to the police.

All of a sudden I was wide awake. It was all up to me now. I was going to be the hero.

And last night had been the perfect night to start. The first game of a big home-and-home series with the toughest team in the league — the Boston Beans.

The Beans were way out in front in the Eastern Division. The second-place team, New York, was nine full games behind.

Us? Well, we had climbed out of the cellar and risen to fourth place (out of six teams). Not terrific, but we did feel we could hold our heads high when we went to Boston.

We scored three runs in the first inning. The big hit was a two-run triple by Angel. Our defense was tight, too. I think the Beans were shocked.

But sure enough, some weird stuff started happening in the seventh. The Beans had tied it up, 4–4, and they were batting. Berke was on the mound and he was beginning to look tired. The bases were loaded with one out, and a right-handed hitter was due up. The Beans' manager, Henry Fee, called the hitter back. Instead, he sent up a pinch-hitter, Milt Powesk.

Now, Fee had made a typical baseball move. He put Powesk in because he's a left-handed power hitter, and Berke is a left-handed pitcher. Lefties hit better against lefties.

What would you do if you were Pappas, and you saw that your pitcher was tired? Replace the pitcher with a righty, right?

If you asked a hundred managers that question, ninety-nine would do that. But not Pappas — and guess why?

That's right. The computer. He was staring at a screen that looked like this:

INNING: 7
OPPONENT: BOSTON
MEN ON BASE: 3
PITCHER: BERKE, L
BATTER: POWESK, L
UMBER OF PITCHES THROWN: 112
PITCHER MENTAL CONDITION: POOR
ADVICE: KEEP PITCHER IN

I was in the dugout by then. I'd been benched because I pulled

my back in the second inning. "Aren't you going to take him out, Pappas?" I asked.

Pappas scratched his head. "I can't," he said. "Look at the screen."

"Ignore it," I replied, trying not to sound too frantic. "Computers aren't always right."

"You heard what Throttlebottom said — stick with the computer!"

"But —"

"Listen, you want to be the manager? Huh? Take it up with the Great Dome after the season!"

He wasn't going to listen. Needless to say, the Beans slammed poor Berke. By the end of that inning the score was 9–4, Beans.

Berke slumped back to the dugout. He was too proud to ask Pappas to take him out. But still, there was this confused look in his eyes.

"Okay, guys," I said. "Let's look alive! We can still do it!"

"You bet!" Angel replied. He was due up first.

He ripped one into the right-field corner for a triple. Then Kazmer fouled out, but Farrar sent a screamer just past the third baseman's glove and Angel scored. Erik Olson, who was subbing for me, singled Farrar home.

It was now 9–6, with a runner on first and only one out. I made everyone wear "rally caps." That's when you turn your cap inside out and put the brim up. It looks ridiculous, but it's for good luck.

The number-nine spot was up, and that meant the pitcher. Now, Berke had just been shellacked for five runs, and he's a terrible hitter anyway. If there was ever a time to get him out of the game, it was now. We had some good pinch hitters on the bench — including Popp, who's one of the best.

But once again, Pappas looked to the laptop. And once again, it said KEEP PITCHER IN.

Pappas slapped the computer a couple of times. Then he shrugged and said, "Go get 'em, Berke."

"What?" practically the whole team said at once.

"What are you guys, a singing group or a ball club?" Pappas shot back.

Berke walked to the plate. shaking his head. He took a couple of cuts and missed. Then. on an 0–2 count, he bounced one to shortstop for an easy double play. Inning over, rally cut short.

Now the whole team was grumbling. As Farrar put on his glove, he said to me. "I swear, if the old man keeps this up, I'm going straight to Throttlebottom and tell him what's happening!"

"No!" I blurted. I could just imagine what Throttlebottom would do. He'd trade Farrar on the spot.

Farrar had a wild look in his eye. "Are you crazy, too? What's the matter, Dion? You and Pappas throwing the game or something?"

I bowed my head. Sooner or later, I realized, the truth had to come out. "No," I said, "but Throttlebottom is."

"Whaaaaaat?" Farrar looked like he'd been hit by a truck.

"Come on, take the field or forfeit the game!" the home-plate umpire bellowed.

Farrar turned around slowly and ran to position at third base. On his way, he whispered something to Berke.

From the look on Berke's face, I knew that Farrar had spilled the beans.

And then we spilled the Beans — the Boston Beans, that is! Berke got so angry he began pitching like an ace. The others were inspired by him, and we rallied in the ninth.

The big hit was a towering three-run homer by guess who? Farrar!

We won by a score of 11–10 — and after the game, Farrar and I had a secret meeting with Pappas at a burger joint on the edge of town.

Well, we told Pappas everything but he didn't believe us. In fact, he stormed out without finishing his meal and left us with the bill!

It wasn't until midnight that I heard from Pappas again. He

called me at the hotel.

"Dion," he said, "I've been thinking about what you said."

"Uh-oh," I replied. "You're having me arrested, right?"

"Nope. But we may both be out of a job when Throttlebottom gets through with us. 'Cause I'm throwing away my computer!"

September 18

We swept that series. Yes, you heard right. We took six straight games from the Beans and moved into a tie for third place. We started September only five games out of first.

Without his laptop, Pappas was a great manager. He knew exactly which players to use and which to save. He called hit-and-run plays that worked. He positioned the fielders perfectly. He called for bunts at unexpected times. He argued close calls with the umpires.

The other teams were shaken up. Boston went into a terrible slump. All of a sudden, we were playing like a contender.

And slowly, we became one. We crept up in the standings, past New York. Second place! Then, last night we faced the Omaha Landlubbers for our biggest game of the year.

Why was it the biggest? Because we were only a half-game out of first. A victory would put us in a tie with Boston.

We were playing at home, and the stands were jammed. I had never seen a crowd like this — at least not in New Jersey. When our names were announced, they all chanted, "GI-ANTS! GI-ANTS! GI-ANTS!" They did a wave to the right, and then one to the left. Then they did both at the same time, and the wave collapsed in the middle. We were so excited, we practically flew onto the field.

Except for me. I kind of hobbled. My old back injury from that August game with Boston has been getting worse and worse. Pappas lets me play every other game, but I have to beg him.

Rupert Main was pitching for us. He is a German-born Romanian, the first Eastern European to make it to the American big leagues. It took him a while to get the hang of it, but now he's hot. In fact, he was pitching a three-hit shutout right into the ninth.

The only problem was that the Omaha pitcher, Robin Hardy, had a two-hit shutout. It was 0-0, and both of those guys were still strong as bulls.

On the other hand, I was in agony. I was determined not to let it show. But in the bottom of the ninth, I had to. Farrar drew a walk with two out, and I was supposed to hit next.

I knew there were plenty of stronger hitters than me on the bench. "Pappas," I said, "maybe you should put Olson in."

Pappas gave me a long look. "No," he said. "I want you up there."

"But —"

He smiled. "This time there's no computer, Dion. It's my decision. Everyone knows how you feel. But when they see you up there, it inspires them. If you can swing a bat, I'm keeping you in."

What could I say? I limped out to the batter's box, dragging my bat behind. There was a burst of cheering from the fans. I looked up into the seats behind the dugout and saw my wife. She looked worried, so I gave her a wink.

Then I saw Throttlebottom. He was sitting a few rows in front of her, and he had this huge grin on his face.

I knew why he was grinning. He was glad I was up. He thought I'd be an easy out.

I could feel my blood boil. Many years ago, I was a fat boy and I was awful at sports. I was always the last one picked on a team. Whenever a team got me, the other side would laugh. "You're stuck with Dion!" they'd chant. Well, I dedicated my whole life to getting better. Now all of those guys are in boring jobs, and I'm the one who made the pros. The last laugh was mine.

Now, when I looked into Throttlebottom's smiling face, I could see those same kids taunting me.

I was going to have the last laugh again.

I dug my heels in. It felt like there was a steel clamp pinching the bottom of my spine. I lifted the bat, and a jolt of pain ripped through me. It hurt so much I saw stars. But I blinked and tried to focus on Hardy.

The first pitch was a ball, high and inside. He was trying to brush me back. Well, I just dug in harder. The next pitch was another high fastball. This time it was in the strike zone. I gritted my teeth. I swung.

Crrrrrrack! I almost passed out from the pain. My eyesight went blurry. I didn't know if that sound was the bat hitting the ball — or my spine.

When I could see straight again, I noticed the left fielder running into the corner. The crowd was yelling. Farrar was rounding second at full speed.

I knew I'd had a hit but I had to reach first somehow. I put one foot in front of the other. It felt like a month before I got there.

The left fielder frantically threw to the shortstop, and the shortstop threw home.

They were too late. Farrar came across standing up. We had won the game, 1–0. We had also done the impossible — climbed into a first-place tie!

My teammates ran out of the dugout and lifted me into the air. They meant well, but all I can remember is the pain.

No, that's not true. I remember the look on Siano's face, and I'll never forget what he said.

"Dion," he said with this wide-open smile, "if you can do that, then we can win this thing."

October 1

It all came down to today — the final game of the season.

When the regular-season schedule was announced in March, we all knew we'd be playing the Beans today. But never in our wildest dreams did we think it would be for the pennant.

That's right, the pennant. We had an amazing September, winning almost every game. But the Beans never let us pass them. We went into the game with identical records — 89–72. The winner of the game would be the Eastern Division champs.

You can imagine what Throttlebottom was like by now. The few strands of hair he had left were falling out. He had meetings with Pappas after almost every game.

I even overheard them arguing once. Pappas kept saying, "I'm using the computer, Boss, but sometimes it stalls out. I think the battery's dying."

That made me laugh. Pappas was really coming through in the clutch.

There was a crisp breeze on the field, and the sky was so blue it looked like a painting. Every seat in the stadium was taken, but almost no one sat. They were all on their feet with excitement.

The Beans had their ace fireballer on the mound — Hector Juarez. Hector Dejector is his nickname, because that's how you feel after facing him — dejected. He won twenty-nine games this year, including two no-hitters. They say his average fastball is about ninety-four miles per hour, but I know some of them are well over a hundred. One catcher I know broke his wrist catching a Juarez pitch.

Well, Juarez was every bit as excited as we were. He had two big reasons to win. Not only would he bring the pennant to Boston, but he'd be the first thirty-game winner in league history.

And boy, did he come out smoking. I once read somewhere that if something could go faster than the speed of light, it could travel in time. Well, I half expected some of Juarez's pitches to end

up in the next century. That's how fast they were.

But in the fifth inning, he began to slow down. I guess the long season had gotten to him. Not that we rallied or anything, but at least we made contact. Jacobs hit a long fly that their center fielder caught on the warning track. Then their shortstop robbed Angel of a hit by diving to catch a line drive. Kazmer smashed one, too, but right at the first baseman.

Rubin was pitching for us and doing a fine job. He'd given up no runs and only four hits. He set the Beans down in order in the top of the sixth.

We were all charged up when we came to bat in the bottom of the inning. If Juarez kept getting weaker, we knew we stood a chance.

That's when the funny stuff started happening. Juarez's fastball had lost some zip, all right — but he wasn't throwing many fastballs anymore.

His pitches fluttered on the way to the plate. Or they came straight in and then dipped at the final split second. Or they zigged way over to the side and then zagged back in.

We looked pathetic. Juarez struck out the side on nine pitches. Same thing in the seventh.

To say the least, we were baffled.

"When did he learn how to throw a knuckleball?" Jacobs demanded.

"Knuckleball?" Siano said. "I got a screwball."

"I don't know what I got," I added. "But I could swear it curved twice."

"He must be throwing a spitter," Pappas said.

Kazmer shook his head. "Juarez isn't like that. Maybe he's been working on these pitches all along."

We all grunted "yes," even though none of us believed it.

By the bottom of the ninth, the entire stadium was silent. Juarez came to the mound with a perfect game — no runs, no hits, no walks, no errors, no one to have reached first base. In other words, he retired all twenty-four men to face him. The score was

still 0–0.

I was batting seventh today, which meant I was up first. My fingers were shaking. I felt like there was an outboard motor in my stomach.

But I had a strategy. You see, I'd been doing some special exercises and my back was almost completely better. The Beans didn't know this, though. So the last thing they'd expect me to do was bunt.

And that's exactly what I did. The ball squibbed about fifteen feet up the first-base line. Juarez ran after it. I bolted for first, head down.

Whump! We collided at full speed. I fell to the right. Juarez fell to the left. The ball came to a stop right next to him.

I scrambled to my feet, but Juarez grabbed the ball and tagged me. One out. We were two outs away from extra innings now.

Suddenly I heard shouting from behind me. "Time out! Time out! Pick that thing up!"

It was Pappas. He was running out of the dugout, followed by most of the team. His eyes were fixed on a piece of paper on the ground.

He scooped it up and held it in front of the first-base umpire. "Look at this!" he said, practically screaming. "This fell out of Juarez's glove!"

All of us gathered around. It was sandpaper! That's what was making Juarez's pitches dance around so much. He was scraping them.

The umpire's eyes were burning. "This yours?" he said to Juarez.

Juarez just bowed his head and nodded.

"You're out of here!" the ump roared.

The Beans' bench cleared. Now both teams were on the field, yelling, arguing, waving hands, kicking dirt. The fans were stomping and shouting and throwing things on the field.

"I'm playing this game under protest!" Pappas kept yelling.

In the pandemonium, the sandpaper had fallen onto the grass.

I quietly went over and picked it up. It was rough, and had white scrapes on it from the baseballs.

I turned it over in my hands — and my mouth fell open. On the back there was a company name in bold letters: THROTTLEBOTTOM CONSTRUCTION SUPPLIES.

I looked around. The only other person not fighting was Farrar. He was over by the first-base line, taking practice swings. He was due up next, and I guess he didn't want to lose concentration.

"Look at this," I said, holding the sandpaper out to him.

His eyes bugged out. "That rotten little tub of slime," he said. "He couldn't do it through Pappas so he must have gone and bribed Juarez!"

I nodded. "He's sabotaging us through the enemy."

I could almost see the steam rise from Farrar's head.

Well, the umpires finally did clear the field. The Beans' stopper, Mary Crown, was brought in.

Farrar looked like an angry bull as he stepped up to the plate. He drew his bat back and stared at Crown.

The first pitch nicked the inside corner. "Stee-rike one!" the umpire yelled.

Farrar swung at the second pitch so hard he fell over. But he missed it by a mile. "Stee-rike two!"

"Easy out!" someone called out from the Boston dugout. I guess they thought the madder they got him, the worse he'd be.

The next pitch looked way high, but it curved sharply. Farrar ground his teeth. His eyes looked like they'd blaze a hole in the ball. He swung.

Whaacccccck! The ball sailed high. Every eye in the stadium followed it. It was so quiet, you could have heard a leaf hit the ground. B.F. Jung, the left fielder, ran back. He stopped, looked up, then ran back some more.

He leapt. He stretched his glove hand over the top of the fence. It was perfect timing. The ball came down right toward it. He snapped it closed and fell back onto the warning track.

Did he have the ball? No one breathed. Jung rolled twice. He stopped with his glove underneath him. He stayed there for a second, then slowly rose.

He opened his glove. All we saw was brown, brown, brown. The ball had landed in the Boston bullpen!

Farrar could barely get around the bases. Our whole team ran beside him. The fans swarmed the field. Just past third, Jacobs and I carried him to home plate and planted his feet on it.

Pappas was crying. "We did it!" he shouted over and over. To tell you the truth, I felt a lump in my throat, too.

One of the fans on the field had brought a huge radio, turned all the way up. The announcer's voice was all choked and hoarse. His words echoed over the field. I can still hear them loud and clear, and I think I always will:

"The Giants won the pennant! The Giants won the pennant! The Giants won the pennant! The Giants won the pennant! The Giants won the pennant!"

October 3

Well, the season wasn't over. Far from it.

There was still the championship series. We had to face the pennant winner from the Western Division, the L.A. Raycatchers. They were still smarting from the game in June, when Little Waldo Weir beat them with a grand slam. On the TV news last night, the L.A. manager looked right into the camera and said, "We're after one thing, Jersey — revenge!"

The problem was, we all felt a little let down. I mean, after a season like that, who wouldn't? We came out of nowhere and won the pennant on the last day. Not long ago, we were thrilled just to win one game! It was almost too much happiness.

And now we had to do it again. It's hard to explain how it feels. It's like spending your life to finish a project, then having to do it from scratch the next day.

Does it sound like I'm making excuses? Maybe I am. Oh, well, here's what happened. The Raycatchers scored eight times in the first inning. We made four errors and lost the game 17–1.

It felt like the old days again. Luckily we played in L.A. If we were in front of our hometown fans, it would have been even more embarrassing.

Anyway, it's two A.M. right now and I can't sleep. I keep thinking about the game. I keep thinking about the whole season. Maybe we got all the excitement we deserved. Maybe we should just be happy we got as far as we did.

Maybe our winning season was a fluke.

Maybe I should get to sleep.

October 12

The sun just came up. I can see it out my bedroom window. Boy, is it bright. The whole neighborhood seems to be glowing yellow.

I feel a lot better than I did the last time I wrote. But I'm a lot more nervous. Why? Okay, I'll tell you the good news. Today is the last day of the baseball season. The series is tied three games to three. Whoever wins this afternoon is the champion.

Surprised? I am, too. After that first game, we all wanted to crawl in a hole and hide. But I have to give Pappas credit. He sat us down before the second game and gave us a long talk.

"Men," he said, "No matter what happens in this series, I'm proud of you. And you know what? So are the fans. You've given them the most exciting season they've ever seen.

"I just want you to remember something. Think back to April. You weren't thinking of the pennant back then. You didn't expect to win anything. But even when you were losing every day, you kept coming back to the ballpark. You kept holding your heads high. Why?

"Because you cared. You cared about doing your job, about playing hard and doing the best you could.

"And look what happened. It took you a while, but you found out what a good ball club you really were. You did what no one thought you could do.

"Now you're pennant winners. A powerhouse. Newspapers are predicting you'll win it all. But you know what? Nothing's really changed. You're the same team that you were in April. You have the same strengths, the same weaknesses. You're men, not supermen.

"So all you can do is the same thing you did all season. Play hard. Field the ball when it comes to you. Hit your cutoff man. Wait for your pitch. The basics.

"That's all I expect of you. That's all the fans expect. If you

win, fine. If you don't, you'll still hold your heads high — and you'll always talk about this season with a smile on your face."

He gave us a grin. "Okay, now, go get 'em."

We all started to cheer, but Farrar stood up and said, "Wait a minute." His eyes were all watery as he turned to face the rest of us. "Uh, I've been on this club since some of you were in grade school. It's been twelve long, losing years, but this season has made up for it all." He smiled and looked at Pappas. "I never told you this, but I plan to retire after this year, and I just want to say that you're the best manager I've ever seen. Thanks for the year of a lifetime, Pappas."

Well, we were all stunned. No one knew Farrar was going to leave the team. I felt I had to say something.

"Are we going to let Farrar down in his last game?" I called out.

Everyone shouted at once. "No!"

"Are we going to play our hearts out, and be proud no matter what happens, like Pappas says?" I said.

"Yes!" they all answered.

I roared as loud as I could, "Then what are we sitting around here for?"

You should have heard the noise as the team rushed out to the field. I've never seen the guys so charged up. To make a long story short, we won that second game, 7–1. Jacobs hit a homer into the upper deck, and Skaja and Seitz scattered eight hits.

The Beans took the next two, 4–3 and 3–1. They led the series three games to one, but we came back to win two more, 9–5 and 2–0.

And now, here we are. It's only the biggest day of the whole season — maybe the biggest day of my life.

My wife is still asleep. I think I'll go to the park at take some very early batting practice. That ought to calm me down.

I'll write more later.

Oh, boy.

Boy, does this stink.

I don't know what I'm going to do.

Okay. Okay. Let me start at the beginning. Like where I am now and what happened. First of all, it's still early in the morning. It's 7:15 A.M. and here I am at home again. I never did any batting practice. In fact, I'm in no mood to play baseball at all. Not after what I just heard.

I'm getting ahead of myself again. You have to excuse me. I've hardly ever been this upset. You see, it has to do with Throttlebottom.

That's right. You didn't think he was just going to drop off the face of the earth, did you?

Well, there I was, happy as could be. I was walking through the stadium, looking at the rows and rows of empty seats. The grass sparkled with early morning dew, and it smelled sweet and sharp. I took a deep whiff, then headed into the dugout.

There's a door in back of the dugout. Just beyond it is a tunnel that forks. If you go right at the fork, you head into the locker room. If you go left, through another door, you head toward the team's executive offices.

Now, the left part of the fork is always locked, especially after hours. So I was a little suspicious when I found the door ajar. Was someone working this early? Did a thief break in?

I pushed the door open. Carefully I tiptoed down the carpeted hallway. A few yards away was a small suite of offices. Its door was made of carved oak, and it had gold lettering that said J. THROTTLEBOTTOM, TEAM OWNER.

That door was open, too. I could hear shuffling inside. I sneaked closer.

There was some muttering now. At first I didn't recognize the voice. Then it got louder, and I froze.

It was Throttlebottom himself. I pressed myself to the wall and listened.

"I don't care if I woke you up!" Throttlebottom was saying to someone on a phone. "You should be up anyway. It's the most important day of the year! … Yeah, yeah, I know how much I owe

you! I lost my entire fortune on the regular season, but I'm not going to pay you today!"

I could hear the voice on the other end screaming.

"Calm down, Benny," Throttlebottom said. "You'll get your money tomorrow. That is, if you do me a small favor. Now, the odds are still against the Giants, are they not? … Good, I thought so. All you have to do, Benny, is loan me the money I owe you —"

The voice started screaming again.

"Just listen to me!" Throttlebottom demanded. "Bet that money on the Giants — to win!"

October 13

The game was yesterday. The championship is over, and I'm exhausted.

I felt like taking today off from writing, but I can't. I just have to tell you the bizarre ending of this bizarre season.

It feels like years since yesterday morning. I couldn't believe what I had heard in Throttlebottom's office. What a rat he was. He didn't care about his team, only about money.

But now he was betting for us to win! What were we supposed to do? Lose, so we could teach him a lesson? Of course not. We had to play to win.

But if we won, Throttlebottom would win, too. The whole idea made me burn with anger. The first thing I did was call Pappas.

I told him everything. When I finished, all he said was, "Is that it?"

"Is that it?" I repeated. "Isn't that enough? Don't you realize what this means?"

"Mm-hm," he said flatly. "I'll take care of it."

"You'll — what — how —" I stammered.

"You heard me, Dion," Pappas replied. "Now, you had no business being in that office. What if someone had caught you?"

"But — but —"

"Just concentrate on the game!" Pappas said. "I don't want you to be distracted — and don't you mention a word of this to anybody! Got me?"

"Uh, yeah."

"See you later, pal."

That was that. Now I really didn't know what to think. Was Pappas in cahoots with Throttlebottom after all? Was his speech in the locker room just a way of making sure Throttlebottom won his bet?

I tried not to feel betrayed. I tried not to feel anything. There was only one important thing that day, only one thing I needed to think about. The game.

It seemed just about everyone in the world was thinking about it, too. I'd never seen so many TV cameras on the field. The press box was crammed with reporters from newspapers and radio stations I'd never heard of. There were announcers from Japan and England and Germany. Before the game, someone started interviewing me in Swedish, and all I could do was smile and say "yes."

The fans were yelling so loud they couldn't hear our names being announced. When I ran out, I tipped my hat at my wife. She waved back, and I thought I saw tears of happiness in her eyes.

I wish I hadn't seen Throttlebottom sitting near her. The smile on his face almost turned my stomach.

When Rubin struck out the side in the first, I thought the stadium was going to fall down. The fans were stomping so hard, you could see the upper deck shake.

And when Prokop homered to open our half of the inning, I thought I'd lose my hearing.

It seemed we could do no wrong. We scored another run in the first, and one in the second.

But the good times didn't last very long. Boston rallied for three in the fourth, on a walk, a single, a bunt sacrifice, another single, and a triple.

We came back in the sixth when Kazmer got hit by a pitch with the bases loaded. Then we went ahead by two on Farrar's single. The lead kept changing hands. By the bottom of the eighth, the game was tied 7–7.

Marv Crown was pitching for the Beans. He got two quick outs, then Jacobs worked him to three and two, and sent a shot into left. He went in standing with a double.

Then Angel came up. He smashed up the middle. Ben Storm leapt and got his glove on it. But the ball bounced off and dribbled into center. Jacobs raced around third. Gunther Bahr picked up the ball and fired a strike to the catcher, Jim Wise. It popped into his mitt the moment Jacobs started his slide.

But it popped out the moment the two collided!

It sounded like World War Three in the stands. Someone had brought fireworks and was setting them off.

We struck out to end the inning. The score was 8–7. All that separated us from the championship now was three outs.

Three big outs.

Just how big, we were about to find out. First Gunther Bahr drew a walk. Pappas brought in Seitz to pitch, and he immediately gave up a double to Deak Smith. That put runners on second and third. We walked John Deaff intentionally to set up the double play.

That brought up Rick Teylan with the bases loaded and no outs.

Let me tell you about Teylan. He hit 33 homers during the regular season, with 125 RBIs. He's about six-foot-five and as mean as a bull. Legend has it he once threw a small car across the freeway in an argument.

Seitz's first pitch was a mistake — a fastball right down the pike. Teylan ripped it so hard I thought it would never come down. I felt my heart sink.

But it hooked to the left, just outside the foul pole. We were still alive. Seitz came back with a curve, which I thought was on the inside corner.

"Ball," the umpire said.

I wanted to strangle him. I whirled around, but I could see Pappas bolting up from his seat in the dugout. I stopped myself from arguing. The last thing we needed was for me to get thrown out of the game.

Teylan flexed his fingers around the bat. His triceps looked like granite as he drew the hat back. I gave Seitz the signal for a slider.

The pitch sailed in. Teylan swung so hard I could hear the *whoosh*.

Then *crraaack!* He hit it!

The ball jammed straight downward. It bounced in front of the

plate. then slightly to the right.

"Fair!" the ump called.

I pounced on it. Teylan sprinted toward first. Gunther Bahr was heading toward me like a freight train.

I stepped on home plate for the force. One out. I threw to Farrar at third. Double play.

Then Farrar rushed a throw to second. Weir had to jump for it, but he came down smack on second base.

"Out!" the second-base ump bellowed.

I screamed so loud, I thought my throat would rip. A triple play! The game was over!

The Jersey Giants, laughingstocks of the Republic League, were the champs!

The dugout emptied. Pappas jumped on me, and he's not a light man. The two of us rolled to the ground.

"Look!" he said, pointing into the stands.

I followed his finger. There were four cops surrounding Throttlebottom. One of them was leading him to the aisle with handcuffs.

"What — how —" was all I could say.

"Remember I said I'd take care of it?" Pappas shouted. "Ever since we first found out about him, they've had his phone tapped. When you told me what you heard this morning, I called the police. They heard the tape and wanted to get Throttlebottom right away."

Pappas grinned from ear to ear. "But I told them to wait until the game was over — just when he thought he'd gotten away with it!"

I stared at Pappas for a minute. All the events were swirling round and round in my head. Then I did something I never thought I'd be able to do.

I picked the old man up. All 275 pounds of him, right up on my shoulders like a little boy.

I don't care how many thousands of people were on the field right then. You could hear us yelling above them all!

Dear Reader,

I hope you liked reading *Bases Loaded II: Second Season*. Here is a list of some other books that I thought you might like:

Baseball Fever
by Johanna Hurwitz

The Kid from Tompkinsville
by John R. Tunis

The Kid Who Only Hit Homers
by Matt Christopher

S.O.R. Losers
by Avi

Short Season
by Scott Eller

Stealing Home: The Story of Jackie Robinson
by Barry Denenberg

You can find these books at your local library or bookstore, Ask your teacher or librarian for other books you might enjoy!

B
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F
N

Other
WORLDS OF POWER
books you will enjoy:

BLASTER MASTER

METAL GEAR

NINJA GAIDEN

CASTLEVANIA II: SIMON'S QUEST

WIZARDS & WARRIORS

BIONIC COMMANDO

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